
NORTH CAMBRIDGE

NEIGHBORHOOD STUDY

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I N T R O D U C T I O N



Introduction

During the past decade, the City of Cambridge, along with the surrounding region, has witnessed a wave of commercial growth and economic development. This growth has expanded the City's revenues and has created new jobs and opportunities for its residents. Cambridge today is one of the few cities in the Commonwealth that is not experiencing a cutback in services. This is due in part to increases in its tax base resulting from commercial growth.

While many residents welcome this return to prosperity, it has also heightened awareness of issues which are of concern to neighborhood residents including: gentrification, increased traffic and parking problems, the rising cost of housing, sufficient open space resources, and the threat to neighborhood character and quality of life.

In order to assess the impacts of this new development, obtain an updated profile of neighborhood residents, and establish an action plan to address these issues, the Community Development Department has initiated a new program within its Neighborhood Planning Component. Beginning in East and North Cambridge, the Department is working with neighborhood residents to create a plan for the future of their neighborhoods.

Purpose of the Study

The purposes of the North Cambridge Neighborhood Study are to:

- (1) Examine the current demographic composition of North Cambridge and document the changes which have occurred since 1970.
- (2) Assess the physical changes which have occurred in the zoning, land uses, commercial establishments, housing stock, and open space resources.
- (3) Identify residents' opinions regarding their neighborhood and those changes.

- (4) Help neighborhood residents to articulate any concerns they have regarding changes in North Cambridge.

- (5) Formulate an action plan which will serve as a general guide and a joint city and neighborhood work plan for future growth and improvements.

To accomplish these objectives, staff from the Community Development Department worked closely with a newly formed North Cambridge Neighborhood Study Committee, composed of sixteen neighborhood residents. The Committee met from June 1988 to February 1989 to discuss the major issues facing their neighborhood: population changes, land use and zoning, the development process, Massachusetts Avenue, Alewife, traffic and parking, housing, and parks and open space. During these meetings, the Committee reviewed new information, discussed the results of a recent demographic and community opinion survey, invited guests to share their particular expertise, and strove for consensus around neighborhood concerns and recommendations for each topic.

Methodology

The Community Development Department and the North Cambridge Neighborhood Study Committee used a variety of research methods in compiling information for this report. This information has been the basis for the recommendations which conclude each topic area. The most significant information sources include:

- (1) 1970 and 1980 U.S. Census data.
- (2) A comprehensive land use inventory and an in-depth analysis of commercial and industrial sites.
- (3) A study of the existing zoning in North Cambridge, including allowable potential development in each zoning district.
- (4) A study of housing characteristics and sales trends from 1960 to 1986.

(5) A demographic and community opinion random telephone survey of 416 North Cambridge residents conducted by Bell Associates in 1988. The survey results, presented throughout the report, are estimated to be accurate within plus or minus five percent.

Community Participation Process and Outreach Methods

The Community Development Department and the North Cambridge Neighborhood Study Committee have worked together to create an open and inclusionary process for formulating the neighborhood study. The following steps were taken to ensure community input and review:

(1) On May 23, 1988, the North Cambridge Stabilization Committee held a widely publicized meeting to discuss the undertaking of the North Cambridge Neighborhood Study. Interested residents volunteered to be part of the Study Committee. During the following two weeks, other residents were asked to participate on the Study Committee to achieve an even broader representation.

(2) The Neighborhood Study Committee met weekly from June through October 1988 to discuss selected topics. Representatives from city agencies (Public Works Department, Conservation Commission, Traffic Department, Community Development Department), and Homeowners' Rehab Inc., a non-profit housing agency, served as resources for the Committee. In addition, members from the Stabilization Committee, the Business Association of North Cambridge, and other interested residents participated occasionally in the Study Committee meetings.

(3) The Community Development Department and Study Committee members provided periodic updates to the Stabilization Committee during the study.

(4) In November and December 1988, the Study Committee and Community Development Staff met with the North Cambridge Stabilization Committee to present their research findings and

discuss their concerns and preliminary recommendations. The Study Committee then revised the Study draft following these meetings.

(5) In January 1989, a summary of the research findings, Study Committee concerns and preliminary recommendations along with a notice of public meeting to discuss the draft appeared in the North Cambridge News. The North Cambridge News is distributed to every household in North Cambridge.

(6) On January 11, 1989, a neighborhood-wide meeting was held to provide an opportunity for all residents to comment on, and suggest changes to, the Committee's draft report. Additional revisions were made to the draft as a result of this meeting.

Study Area

North Cambridge is located in the northwestern corner of the City. (See map on page 15.) Referred to by the City as Neighborhood 11, its official boundaries are Somerville to the north, Arlington and Belmont to the west, the B&M railroad line to the south and Porter Square to the east. (See map on page 17.)

Although North Cambridge extends officially to Belmont, most residents refer to the large non-residential area west of the Alewife Brook Parkway as simply Alewife. Alewife actually extends south of the railroad tracks into Neighborhood 12; however, for the purposes of this study, the Committee examined the Alewife area in its entirety.

Highlights of the Study Committee Concerns

(1) Committee members think that the existing Industry C zoning district and the three Industry A-1 zoning districts are incompatible with the surrounding residential areas. Individually, the amount of development potential permitted in each of these zones is too great. When taken together, the combined development potential in the Industry C (Whittemore Avenue), the Industry

A-1 (Linear Park), and the Business C-1 (Trolley Square) districts would result in substantial overdevelopment of the neighborhood.

(2) The lack of a safe pedestrian crossing at the B&M railroad tracks is extremely dangerous. The Committee feels strongly that this situation, having already caused a number of fatalities, should be attended to immediately. Many residents, including young children and elderly people, cross the tracks to reach the Fresh Pond Shopping Center. Many more children will use this as a shortcut when the Thomas Danehy Park is completed.

(3) The Committee raised many concerns regarding the land use decision making process in Cambridge. They are confused about the different roles, responsibilities, powers and limitations of the various city boards and the departments that staff them.

(4) One of the strongest and most persistent concerns of the Study Committee centered around the zoning in Trolley Square. Members feel that the entire Business C-1 zoning district is inappropriate.

(5) In particular, Committee members question whether the special permit criteria in Trolley Square are consistent with the objectives of neighborhood residents. In most cases, members believe that the public amenities achieved through the special permit process are not worth the increased density allowed by the permit.

(6) The Committee would like to see regulations adopted along Massachusetts Avenue which would require a more stringent design review process.

(7) The interface between commercial and residential uses is a problem for many residents in certain areas on and surrounding Massachusetts Avenue. Trucks serving businesses use residential streets throughout the day and night. In addition to the noise, other activities, such as early morning trash pickup, also create considerable problems for residents living close to these businesses.

(8) The vision for Alewife as described in the 1979 Alewife Revitalization Plan has not material-

ized. On the contrary, the Committee is concerned with the way in which development has been occurring in this area. Alewife has been compared to a suburban shopping center with too much asphalt, concrete and buildings which do not relate well to each other. Rather than being an environment which is friendly and inviting to people, the area has remained stark, mundane and isolated from the surrounding neighborhoods.

(9) The existing zoning in the Alewife area allows approximately thirteen million additional square feet of development. The Committee believes that if built, this amount of development would have a devastating impact on the area's natural resources. The wetlands serve an important ecological, as well as aesthetic, function and must be protected. Because the entire area is situated in a flood plain, the amount of development and the location and form of the buildings are of particular importance.

(10) The amount of traffic in North Cambridge has increased steadily over the past few years. Increased traffic congestion has resulted in more accidents, greater amounts of noise, trip delays and an overall deterioration in the quality of life. The Committee is concerned that new development will further exacerbate this situation.

(11) The Committee is adamantly opposed to the Massachusetts Department of Public Works proposed Route 2 roadway improvements as presented in the Fall 1988 for the following reasons:

- The proposed roadway will not solve the traffic problem in the Alewife area, but rather, will merely push the traffic further into Cambridge;
- It will exacerbate traffic congestion at the Fresh Pond Reservation rotary, endangering the water supply;
- It is not worth \$40 million of public funds;
- It breaks with a long-standing public policy that through traffic into Boston should not be encouraged;

- It ruins the Metropolitan District Commission and the City of Cambridge's Alewife Brook Parkway greenbelt concept;
- It exacerbates an already seriously dangerous situation for pedestrians; and
- It creates a barrier which will further separate North Cambridge from the Alewife area.

(12) Committee members think that one of the most positive features of their neighborhood is the diversity of its population, and maintaining the mix of residents is an important priority for the Committee. However, the rising cost of housing is making it extremely difficult for long-time residents and their families to remain in the neighborhood. In addition, the high cost of housing prohibits many low and moderate income people from moving into the neighborhood. The Committee is concerned that if present trends continue, North Cambridge will be only affordable to a narrow segment of the population.

(13) Due to expiring Section 8 rental subsidies and use restrictions, the future of many affordable units in the Fresh Pond Apartments (Rindge Towers) is uncertain. Under current federal regulations 338 subsidized units are in danger of losing their Section 8 status in 1991. In addition, the mortgage of one building is eligible for prepayment in 1993. This means that the owner might be able to sell another 274 units at market rates. The loss of these units could displace hundreds of North Cambridge residents and drastically add to the affordable housing crisis.

(14) Increasingly, new housing units are being built without regard to the existing scale and character of the neighborhood or parking and traffic problems. At the same time the neighborhood is often asked to support greater density in order to receive a limited number of affordable units in a particular project. This dilemma is of concern to the Committee, and they would like to ensure that it is appropriately addressed when areas within North Cambridge are rezoned.

(15) Park planning, design and maintenance are carried out by different city agencies. This division

of labor results in a lack of coordination on park issues. Committee members would like to see a cohesive and systematic approach towards all facets of park management and maintenance.

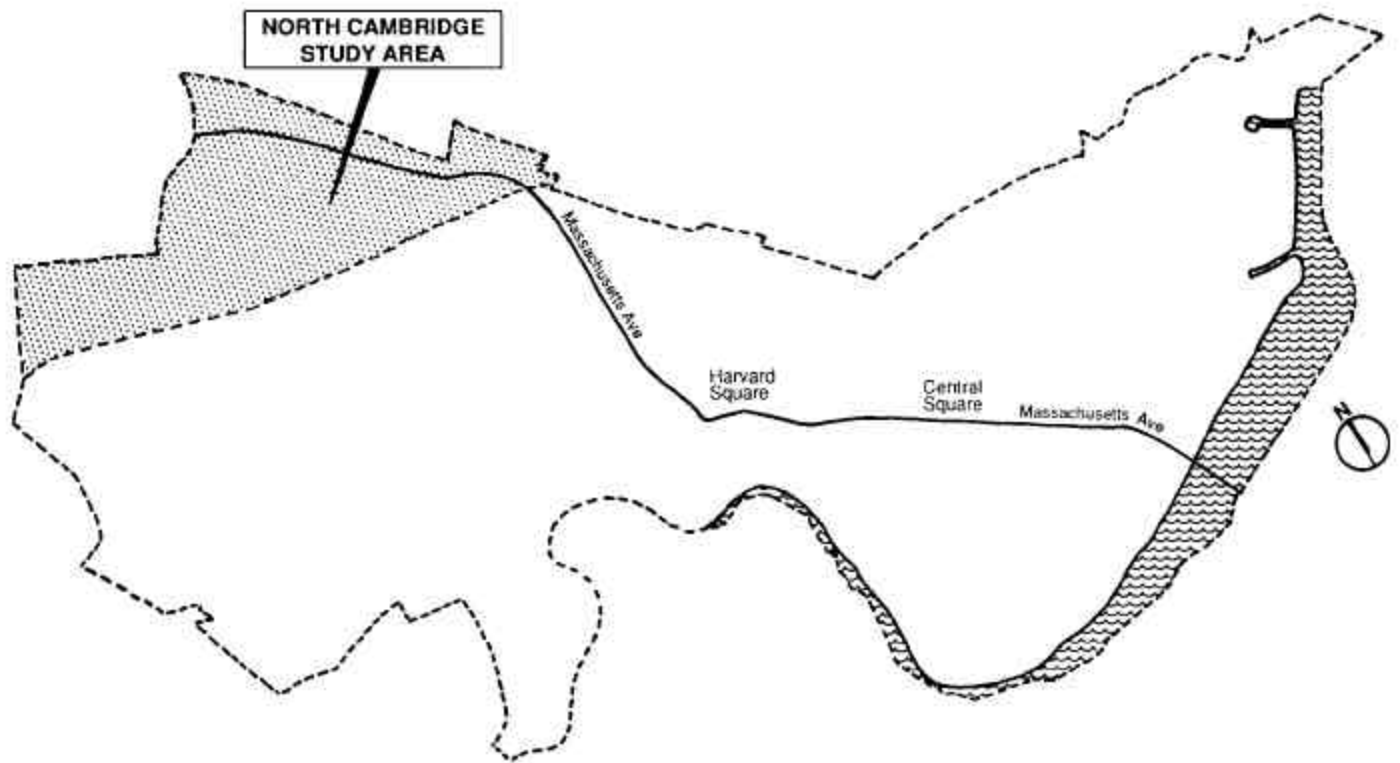
(16) The Committee is very concerned about the wetlands in the Alewife area. These "urban wilds" are the last remaining natural land in Cambridge and, as such, should be protected. Not only are these lands important aesthetically, but wetlands serve important ecological functions, as well. In addition to their protection, they should be better maintained, and people should be better educated as to their value.

Highlights of the Recommendations

A principal feature of the Neighborhood Study is the series of recommendations in each topic area. The North Cambridge Study Committee and the Cambridge Community Development Department jointly support each of the recommendations presented in this book. Some of the most significant recommendations are presented below:

(1) Rezone the Industry C and Industry A-1 zoning districts to make them more compatible with the surrounding residential areas. The rezoning process should include: arranging a dialogue between area residents and property owners to see if an appropriate rezoning package could be negotiated; carefully studying the relationship between density, economic vitality and traffic generation; encouraging an appropriate balance of residential and commercial uses; investigating all options to maximize affordable housing opportunities; and creating an urban design plan for the parcels of land on Rindge Avenue with the involvement the residents of Jefferson Park and the Fresh Pond Apartments in formulating this plan. Finally, if the remaining sites in the Industry C zone are developed commercially as part of Alewife Center, continue to restrict access from Harvey Street. (See page 41.)

(2) Improve pedestrian access from the Fresh Pond Apartments and Jefferson Park area to the



NORTH CAMBRIDGE NEIGHBORHOOD STUDY

NEIGHBORHOOD LOCATION

City of Cambridge

Cambridge Community Development
Fall 1990

Fresh Pond Shopping Center and Thomas Danehy Park. This should be done by adding a stairway to the Alewife Brook Parkway bridge. Once the Thomas Danehy Park is completed and used, the feasibility of a pedestrian overpass will be reconsidered. (See page 63.)

(3) Develop a procedure to improve the coordination of review processes for proposed development projects with all appropriate City agencies, such as the Community Development Department, Inspectional Services Department, Traffic Department, License Commission, Conservation Commission and Rent Control Board. (See page 50.)

(4) Work with neighborhood groups to delineate ways in which communication could be improved between the Community Development Department and the community to clarify what the City considers to be "valid community input." (See page 43.)

(5) Work with the neighborhood to examine specific issues where the neighborhood has continual problems with land use policies and determine whether recommendations should be made to change these policies. (See page 44.)

(6) Examine the special permit criteria of the Business C-1 zoning district (Trolley Square) to determine how the process can be more effectively utilized to produce amenities for the neighborhood. (See page 50.)

(7) Establish a binding design guidelines review process for Massachusetts Avenue for all new projects over a certain size. (See page 50.)

(8) Work with area residents and local businesses to establish reasonable delivery and trash pick-up hours in those commercial areas directly affecting residential properties. (See page 50.)

(9) Encourage improvements to the Alewife Brook Parkway/Route 2 which will improve safety and reduce traffic congestion in the area; ensure that the water supply at the Fresh Pond Reservoir and the wetlands at the Alewife Reservation are not adversely affected; continue the long-standing public policy that through traffic into Boston should

not be encouraged; preserve and enhance the Metropolitan District Commission and the City of Cambridge's greenbelt concept at Alewife Brook Parkway/Route 2; improve pedestrian access; and prevent the creation of a barrier separating North Cambridge from the Alewife area. (See page 61.)

(10) Establish a working committee composed of residents from north and west Cambridge neighborhoods and Alewife property owners to update the 1979 Alewife Revitalization Plan. The committee should take a comprehensive look at the entire Alewife area and make recommendations to the City Council concerning the amount and type of development which is most appropriate for each area within Alewife. (See page 61.)

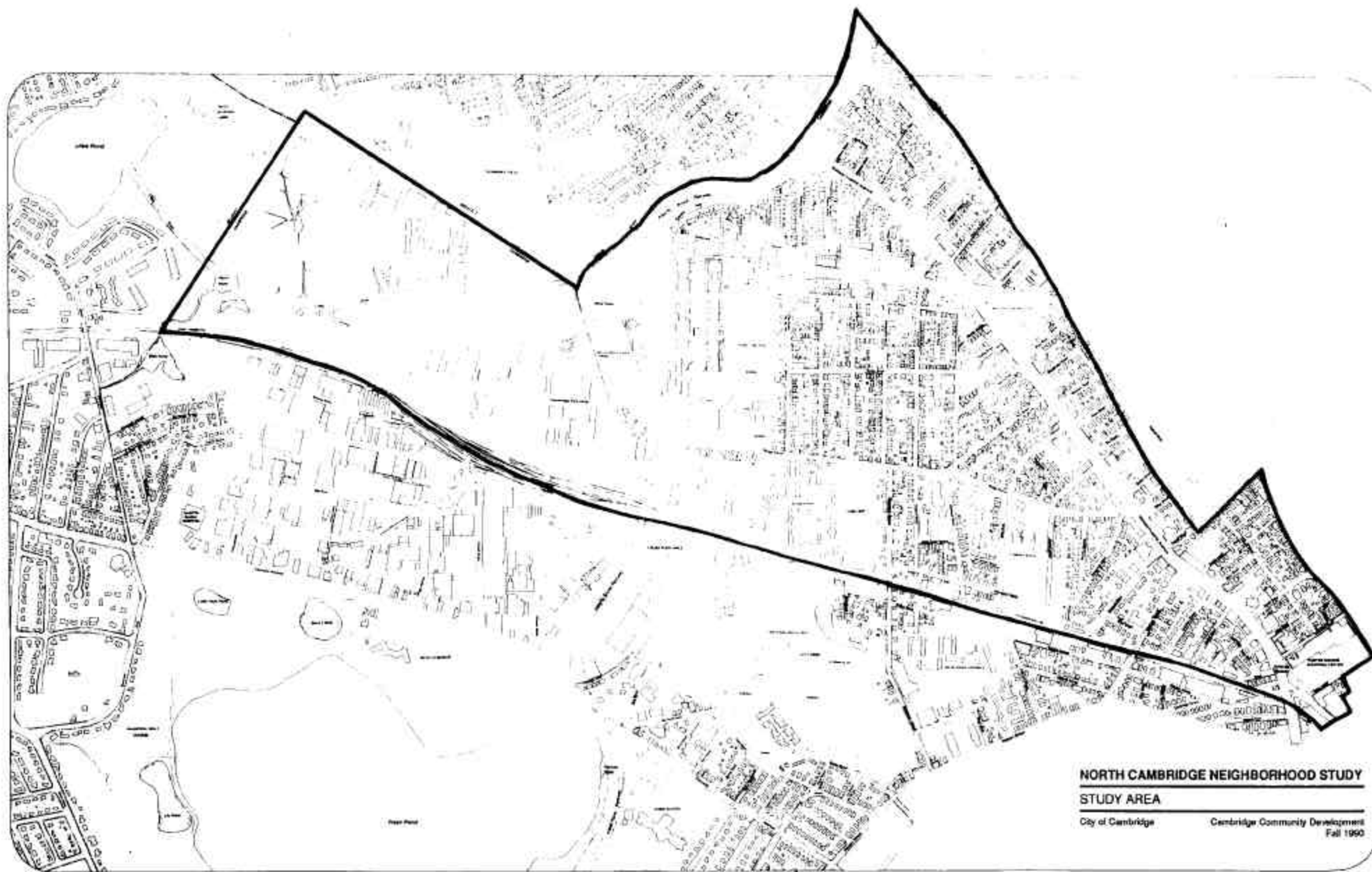
(11) Work with state, regional, and local officials to complete a comprehensive environmental plan for the entire Mystic River Valley Watershed area. The plan should examine the sensitive and fragile ecology of the area and recommend measures to ensure that the flood plains and wetlands are protected and the open space will be preserved. (See page 61.)

(12) Establish strict traffic mitigation measures for all new commercial developments in North Cambridge. (See page 68.)

(13) Establish a special Task Force to examine the expiring use restrictions and Section 8 rental subsidy programs in order to retain these units as affordable housing for low and moderate income tenants. It is critical that steps be taken immediately to preserve these affordable rental units. (See page 82.)

(14) Work with private developers and public agencies to ensure that all new housing developments built are in scale and character with the surrounding neighborhood. Try to retain the present mix of housing types as development continues in the neighborhood by encouraging the inclusion of affordable units in all new housing developments in North Cambridge. (See page 82.)

(15) Create a comprehensive maintenance plan for Cambridge parks. (See page 86.)



NORTH CAMBRIDGE NEIGHBORHOOD STUDY

STUDY AREA

City of Cambridge

Cambridge Community Development
Fall 1990

Organization of the Report

The report begins with an overview of the demographic characteristics of North Cambridge. Next, it highlights resident opinions of neighborhood quality and community participation. For the most part, each subsequent chapter (Land Use and Zoning, The Development Process, Massachusetts Avenue, Alewife, Traffic and Parking, Housing and Parks and Open Space) is organized in the following way:

- (1) Presentation of the research findings;
- (2) Highlights of the 1988 Demographic and Community Opinion survey conducted by Bell Associates;
- (3) Outline of the Study Committee's major concerns; and
- (4) Joint recommendations of the North Cambridge Neighborhood Study Committee and the Community Development Department.